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The Representation of Poverty in Selected Films of Brillante Mendoza: A Semiotic Reading

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ABSTRACT

This paper interprets the works of Brillante Mendoza, a prominent figure in the Philippine independent film movement, through a semiotic analysis. The study aims to explore the conditions of poverty and the related factors that sustain and intensify this social phenomenon by examining Mendoza's films. By analyzing the aesthetic elements of his movies—such as narrative structure, technical presentation, character development, and overall flow—the author seeks to uncover the connotative meanings that contribute to prevailing socio-cultural myths. The paper focuses on four of Mendoza's critically acclaimed films, recognized at international film festivals. Through an analysis of their narratives and thematic content, the study identifies recurring themes such as crime, institutionalized violence, resource scarcity, inequality, sexual exploitation, and overpopulation in impoverished settings. Mendoza's films offer a critical reflection on societal issues, particularly poverty, challenging viewers' perceptions of morality and ethics in situations marked by extreme adversity. By approximating Mendoza's objectives, thoughts, and perspectives on poverty, the author formulates key concepts and myths about poverty as portrayed in his films. The study argues that Mendoza's body of work serves as a powerful critique of societal conditions and underscores the need for collective action to address these persistent challenges. It emphasizes that apathy and indifference are major barriers to eradicating poverty. This comprehensive analysis enriches the discourse on Philippine cinema, underscoring its potential as a medium for social critique and a mirror of complex, multifaceted societal issues.

Keywords: *Brillante Mendoza's films, Kinatay, Masahista, Serbis, Kahirapan.*

INTRODUCTION

A film, like any other art form, serves as a vehicle for conveying emotions and innermost feelings to a wide audience. In the Philippines, film is considered the youngest of the arts due to its relatively late introduction to the country. It was a direct contribution of the colonizers (Arriola & David, 2019). The earliest form of cinema became available to Filipinos only in 1897. Since then, Filipino audiences have witnessed its evolution—from silent films to talkies, and from black-and-white to color films.

In 1919, Filipinos began producing and creating their own films. José Nepomuceno (Bautista, 2015) is credited with founding the Filipino film industry through his film *Dalagang Bukid*, which was based on the musical of the same name written by Hermogenes Ilagan and Leon Ignacio. Nepomuceno, known as the "Father of Philippine Cinema," pioneered a genre rooted entirely in popular *sarswelas* and theatrical dramas. Action films later emerged from the simplistic plots of *komedyas*, which often revolved around the conflict between Christians (depicted as good) and Moros (depicted as bad).

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From then on, Philippine cinema began to move away from established conventions, as seen in the works of Julian Manansala—particularly *Patria Amore* (1929) (Castro, 2014)—which addressed the socio-political issues of the time. The moviegoing public's interest was stirred, and the Filipino brand of filmmaking thrived and flourished despite the influx of Hollywood films.

From the 1940s up to the wartime period, Philippine cinema became increasingly vibrant and engaging. In the early part of the decade, Gerry De Leon—known for films such as *Tatlong Maria* and *Dawn of Freedom*—used cinema as a medium for propaganda in support of the Japanese cause. By 1945–1946, counter-propaganda films gained popularity, driven by the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army and inspired by the heroic deeds of Filipino guerrillas and soldiers. Films such as *Garrison 13* (1946), *Dugo ng Bayan* (1946), *Guerilya* (1946), and *Walang Kamatayan* (1946) presented narratives that resonated with the Filipino public, who were eager to see stories of resistance and national pride (Baskett, 2008). The golden age of Philippine cinema emerged in the decade that followed—the 1950s. The works of Lamberto Avellana (*Anak Dalita*, 1956), Manuel Conde (*Genghis Khan*, 1952), and Gerardo De Leon (*Ifugao*, 1954) defined the era and gave it lasting significance (Philippine Star, 2017).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the youth clamored for social transformation. With Ferdinand Marcos at the helm, the country began to unravel politically. Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972, further agitating activists and idealists. Films critical of the administration—as well as *bomba* or pornographic films—were heavily censored. However, a new *bomba* subgenre emerged during this period, known as the "wet look." One notable example is *Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa* (1974), which starred Gloria Diaz (Bautista, 2015).

The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the rise of young filmmakers such as Celso Ad Castillo, Ishmael Bernal, and Lino Brocka. Their works helped define the era by presenting films that tackled pressing social and political issues such as labor unionism, poverty, and class division. After the lifting of Martial Law, socially conscious films gained more attention. Lino Brocka's *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (1985), Mike De Leon's *Sister Stella L.* (1984), and Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Karnal* (1984) are among the most notable. Alternative filmmakers such as Nick De Ocampo, Kidlat Tahimik, and Raymond Red also attracted both local and international audiences.

The 1980s were also characterized by a boom in romantic films starring popular love teams and actors such as Snooky Serna, Sharon Cuneta, Janice de Belen, Gabby Concepcion, Richard Gomez, Maricel Soriano, William Martinez, Albert Martinez, Aga Muhlach, and Dina Bonnevie. Slapstick comedy, popularized earlier by Dolphy Quizon in the 1960s and 1970s, continued through the works of Tito, Vic and Joey, Roderick Paulate, and others.

Of course, the iconic performances of Fernando Poe Jr. in action films—many of which he directed and produced himself—remained popular throughout the 1980s and into the early 2000s. The decade also saw the emergence of "sex trip" films featuring actresses like Gretchen Barretto and Rita Avila, which catered primarily to a male audience (Philippine Journeys, n.d.).

In 2000, low-budget films from smaller production outfits, led by the works of Lav Diaz, Brillante Mendoza, Raymond Red, Jerold Tarog, Jayson Paul Laxamana, and others, introduced a counterpart to the experimental films of the 1980s, now labeled as independent films (Garcia, 2021). This period was a response to the growing popularity of commercial and Hollywood films that dominated movie houses. Independent films primarily focused on socio-political and cultural themes, distinguishing themselves from the often trivial content offered by mainstream cinema (See Suharto, 2023).

The above survey of Philippine cinema history provides context for the paper's subject matter. Brillante Mendoza, a prominent figure from the era that brought independent films, is a key focus of this study. His works are analyzed here without strict regard for time, historical context, or technicality. The paper identifies a prevailing discourse of poverty in Mendoza's films, with meanings extracted primarily from the major narratives, scenes, shots, characters, and dialogues.

The history of film outlined above demonstrates how the audience, the circumstances surrounding filmmaking, the key players (actors and directors), and the themes have influenced the development of each era. This paper also assumes that these intertwining factors have shaped Brillante Mendoza's works. His films are understood to have emerged from the same set of factors that define the dominant features of his unique filmmaking style.

In this paper, I explore and analyze the iconic representations of poverty in the works of Mendoza. I examine how poverty is portrayed in three ways: ideologically, subjectively, and exaggeratedly. Finally, I discuss the relationship between poverty and the overall narratives of the films under study.

This paper employs semiotics as its primary method. By using semiotics, I was able to extract and identify the iconic representations of poverty within various elements of Mendoza's works. Additionally, by understanding the symbols and signs beneath the surface of these films, I could determine the director's ideological and subjective stance on poverty. I specifically drew on the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes, which builds upon the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce.

The key distinction between Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes lies in their approach to linguistics. Saussure, for example, extensively studied semiology. For him, a sign consists of both the signifier and the signified. Saussure introduced concepts such as language and speech, signifier and signified, as well as connotation and denotation. These dichotomies were essential to his argument that deep meaning can be derived from language and symbols (Hébert, 2006).

In contrast, Peirce also studied semiology but introduced new ideas that departed from Saussure's dichotomies. Peirce argued that a sign consists of three basic components: the Representamen, the Object, and the Interpretant. The Representamen is the sign itself, which enters into a relationship with its Object. The Object refers to the real object the sign represents, but according to Peirce, this object is not the same as the real, perceivable object. Finally, the Interpretant mediates between the Representamen and the Object, simultaneously relating them to one another and to itself. The Interpretant is essentially the sign's meaning.

Roland Barthes adopted most of Saussure's semiotic theories and was particularly fascinated by the denotative-connotative dichotomy. For him, this dichotomy best explains the process of meaning-making. A text always possesses both denotative and connotative meanings simultaneously. Denotative meaning refers to the surface-level meaning of the text, which is immediately apparent and can be extracted through simple observation, without the need for deep contemplation or speculation. In contrast, connotative meaning is derived from in-depth contemplation and seeks to associate the obvious with culturally and socially constructed beliefs and interpretations (Barthes, 1977).

Using the basic principles of semiotics, particularly the denotative-connotative dichotomy, this study extracts significant meanings and symbols from the films' scenes, characters, and overall narratives. By analyzing both the denotative and connotative meanings, the researcher infers important concepts about poverty that both directors appear to suggest.

METHODOLOGY

This paper selected four films by Brillante Mendoza. The selection process was conducted in consultation with film students and faculty members from the College of Communication at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. The key factor that led to the final choice of films, aside from discussions with students and faculty, was their participation and reception at the Cannes Film Festival in France. Mendoza's *Kinatay* (2009) won the Prix de la Mise en Scène at the 62nd Cannes Film Festival in May 2009 and was also nominated for the Palme d'Or at the same festival. Another film selected for this paper is *Serbis* (2008), which also received accolades at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for the Palme d'Or. The third film is *Lola* (2009), Mendoza's powerful entry to the Venice Film Festival in 2009. Lastly, Mendoza's first award-winning film, *Masahista* (2005), starring Coco Martin, was also included. The film won the Golden Leopard Award at the 58th Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland.

The researcher analyzed the films' visual and auditory elements to uncover their symbolic and connotative meanings. By applying semiotic analysis to the selected films, the researcher gained insights into the director's artistic vision, values, and social commentary. For instance, the camera angles in *Serbis* were analyzed to reveal Mendoza's perspective on social issues.

Thus, the research methodology can be characterized by a careful selection of films based on their international recognition and a thorough semiotic analysis of their visual and auditory elements. This approach uncovered the director's cinematic language and his reflections on poverty as a societal issue.

RESULTS

Brillante Mendoza: A Realist Story Teller

Brillante 'Dante' Mendoza was only 11 years old when Lino Brocka won his first FAMAS Best Director award for the film *Tubog sa Ginto* (1970). He was 10 when Brocka directed his first film, *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (1970), which starred Dante Rivero, Boots Anson Roa, and Liza Lorena. While Brocka began his career in the industry at the age of 31, Mendoza directed his first film at 45, with the gay-themed movie *The Masseur* (2005), which featured a Kapampangan masseur named Illac, portrayed by Coco Martin. The film won the Golden Leopard Award at the 58th Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland.

Mendoza's early works that helped establish his career both locally and internationally include: *Ma Rosa* (2016), which was screened in the main competition at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival; *Thy Womb* (2012), which was nominated for the Golden Lion Award at the 2012 Venice Film Festival; *Lola* (2009), which screened at the 2009 Venice Film Festival; *Kinatay* (2009), which earned him the Best Director Award at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival; and *Serbis* (2008), which was nominated at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival.

Mendoza has been associated with a genre often referred to as "poverty pornography" due to his unflinching portrayal of raw poverty, either as a backdrop or central theme in his films. However, Mendoza has repeatedly denied this label. In a 2012 TV interview, he stated: "In my

films, poverty is just a background. It's not what I highlight. It so happens that the characters are poor. That's the reality in the Philippines." He further clarified, "I don't show it for the sake of showing poverty. It just so happens that the characters belong to that community. And I'm not highlighting poverty per se" (Mendoza Denies Indie Films Are Poverty Porn, ABS-CBN News, Jan 12, 2012).

Films Synopsis

a. Masahista

The story is set in the City of San Fernando, Pampanga, and centers on the life of Illiac, a young man who works as a masseur in an establishment called *Maharlika*—a male prostitution den disguised as a legitimate massage parlor. Illiac is apathetic toward his father, who had abandoned the family years ago and returned only recently, now ill and dying. When the father eventually passes away, Illiac and his siblings exhibit no grief over his death.

Illiac provides massage services, along with "special services" for his gay clientele—essentially working as both a masseur and a male prostitute. The story opens with scenes inside the prostitution den, showing male masseurs lined up in a room while clients choose from among them. In one scene, the manager mistakenly assigns Illiac to a customer who had chosen a different, more physically appealing masseur. Displeased, the customer complains, but since his original choice is already booked, he is left with no option but to proceed with Illiac.

The director juxtaposes Illiac's work in the den with scenes of the funeral preparations for his deceased father. These include dressing the body, witnessing the embalming process, and preparing for the wake and burial. Illiac remains emotionally detached from both his clients and his family. He interacts with customers without emotion—flat, mechanical, and superficial. Similarly, he shows no sign of mourning or affection for his father's passing, highlighting his deep emotional numbness.

b. Kinatay: Butchered Destiny

The story revolves around Peping, a criminology student who makes a living by collecting drug money from small-time drug peddlers on behalf of a group of corrupt policemen led by a man known as Kap (Captain). One day, Abyong informs Peping that Kap requires his presence for another operation. Peping reluctantly agrees and gets into a van, unaware of the operation's details.

The van stops at a nightclub, where Sarge, one of the policemen, invites Madonna, a prostitute, into the vehicle under the pretense that Kap wants to talk to her. Once inside, she is violently beaten and restrained. Peping, shocked and confused, silently observes the unfolding events.

Sarge and Chico continue to beat Madonna until she falls unconscious and appears dead. The van then travels along the North Luzon Expressway to an old, secluded house. There, they bring Madonna to the basement and pour water on her to check if she is still alive. When she reacts, Kap receives an order from a certain "Gen" to proceed with her execution. Madonna begs for her life, but to no avail.

Outside, Abyong explains to Peping that Madonna owes the syndicate ₱100,000 worth of drugs. Kap then instructs them to buy liquor. While inside the van, Abyong senses Peping's discomfort and hands him a licensed gun, saying it's a gift from Kap. He tells Peping that the gun

is the cure for his uneasiness and nerves.

At a bus station, Peping is told to buy *balut*. He lingers, contemplating an escape by boarding a bus back to Manila, but hesitates when Abyong calls him.

Back at the house, Sarge resumes beating Madonna. Eventually, Chico stops him and sexually assaults her before finally stabbing and killing her. Sarge and Chico then proceed to dismember her body. Sarge orders Peping to look for a sack or container for the body parts. While searching, Peping is visibly distressed—wobbling, trembling, and occasionally crying—unable to comprehend the horror around him.

The group cleans the crime scene, wiping away blood splatter and disposing of dirty linens. While Sarge and the others behave as if nothing horrific occurred, Peping's anxiety intensifies. On the ride back to Manila, Peping sits in stunned silence as the group casually discards body parts along the highway.

The story ends with Peping in a cab, listening to a news report about the discovery of dismembered body parts in multiple locations. He is overwhelmed by disbelief and guilt. Suddenly, the taxi's tire explodes. Peping gets out and waits at the roadside for a bus, seemingly considering escape. However, when the cab is quickly fixed and the driver calls him back, Peping simply stares at the vehicle for a long moment—then, in resignation or denial, decides to ride the cab again.

c. Serbis: A Dilapidated Society

The story revolves around a dilapidated cinema house in Angeles City, Pampanga. The film opens with a young woman bathing and applying lipstick while whispering "I love you" in the manner of a porn star performing on camera. The camera then weaves its way through a labyrinth of stairs and interconnecting corridors, transitioning fluidly between characters.

Nanay Flor, the family matriarch, descends a staircase as she prepares to attend the verdict of a bigamy case involving her long-estranged husband. Despite her worn appearance and the equally dismal surroundings, Nanay Flor still exudes a sense of power and dignity—remnants of a time when cinema houses flourished, before they were overshadowed by air-conditioned shopping malls with high-tech theaters.

Nayda, her daughter, appears to manage the establishment alongside her submissive husband, Lando. The camera shifts focus to Alan, Nanay Flor's nephew, a painter and projectionist, shown suffering from a painful boil—likely a result of the unhygienic environment. Another relative, Ronald, also a projectionist, is portrayed as a lustful teenager driven by carnal urges. Merly adds to the film's dramatic tension when she becomes pregnant with Alan's child.

The movie house functions as a home, workplace, and hangout spot—a refuge for wandering souls, drawn either by repressed desires or by poverty. It becomes a convergence point for the lives of the central characters, the sex workers, and the patrons who come and go.

Toward the end of the film, Nanay Flor confronts Alan and Merly about the pregnancy, while also grappling with her frustration over losing the case against her bigamous husband. Her son Jerome, after consulting with Nayda, unexpectedly supports the husband's case, motivated by potential disputes over property inheritance.

Nanay Flor instructs Merly to inform her parents about the pregnancy and prepare for a wedding. Later, Alan is seen fleeing the cinema house, seemingly intent on escaping his responsibilities. The camera then turns to Nayda, who casts a warm, lingering gaze at Ronald—

hinting at a possible sexual relationship—while her husband, Lando, quietly watches from a distance. The film ends with Nanay Flor gazing around the deteriorating theater and uttering the line, *"Maraming dapat ayusin"* ("There are a lot of things to fix").

d. Lola: A Future Dependent on Grandmotherly Love

The story begins in Quiapo, Manila. Lola Sepa and her younger grandson visit the venerated church before going to the spot where her older grandson was killed by a cellphone snatcher. They offer prayers and light candles at the site. Despite the tragedy, Lola Sepa must remain steadfast. She has to be strong in the face of devastation and violence, bearing the burden of making funeral arrangements. Due to poverty, the family's immediate concern is not justice or pursuing the suspected murderer, but ensuring a proper burial for her beloved grandson. To cover the funeral expenses, the elderly woman even takes out a loan from a bank.

Meanwhile, another elderly woman, Lola Puring, is determined to get her grandson Mateo out of jail. Mateo is the alleged perpetrator of the murder. Lola Puring grieves for her grandson's imprisonment, and her heart breaks every time she visits him behind bars. However, she does not have the money for bail. In desperation, she secures a collateralized loan from Mrs. Agustin and borrows from relatives and friends to raise the amount needed for his release.

Lola Puring approaches Lola Sepa to offer a settlement. Initially, Lola Sepa refuses, unwilling to accept money in place of justice. But after being persuaded by her daughter and recognizing their own financial hardship, she eventually agrees. A settlement amount is finalized and promptly delivered by Lola Puring. The story concludes in a courtroom, where the case is officially closed due to the desistance of the complainant. The intertwined stories of the two frail, impoverished women end as they part ways—each carrying the weight of grief, sacrifice, and survival.

ANALYSES AND DISCUSSION

a. Kinatay

Like many other poverty-themed films, *Kinatay* presents a situation in which the protagonist is placed in an inescapable predicament (see Kurniaji & Clareta, 2022). This is precisely what happens to Peping. What begins as a simple side job—collecting drug money from small-time dealers for a group of corrupt policemen—suddenly becomes far more complicated when he is asked to join the group in a different operation. Director Brillante Mendoza presents a scenario in which poverty forces individuals into situations where choices are scarce. Limited resources often translate to limited options.

Peping's dilemma begins the moment he steps into the van, agreeing to participate in the operation. This decision changes his life forever. As a newlywed with a baby to support, he cannot easily refuse Kap, his main source of income. The operation becomes a baptism of fire for the young criminology student. The syndicate picks up a prostitute, Madonna, from a club and begins to beat her inside the vehicle. Peping is visibly uncomfortable witnessing the violence. Upon arriving at a safe house, Madonna is raped and repeatedly brutalized by Chico and Sarge before being gruesomely butchered.

Though Peping has previously been involved in petty crimes, he has never witnessed—let alone been an accessory to—such a horrific act. He may have wanted to intervene or escape, but making moral decisions under such extreme pressure becomes nearly impossible. Attempting to save Madonna or fleeing the scene would likely result in his own death—and possibly that of his family. Mendoza uses this dilemma to suggest that poverty sometimes places individuals in situations where ethics, conscience, and morality—though present—are difficult to act upon (Rodriguez, 2021). Despite his discomfort, Peping is paralyzed by fear—for his own life and that of his loved ones.

Mendoza also uses the characters of Kap, Sarge, and the unseen figure of "Gen" to show how those in power are often the source of people's suffering. They manipulate the minds and actions of those beneath them. Peping becomes a victim of this manipulation. One part of him wants to help Madonna, but another part is terrified of Kap's potential retaliation.

As the group drives back to Manila, tossing Madonna's dismembered body parts onto the highway, Peping is overwhelmed with disgust and even vomits at one stop. Mendoza uses this moment to illustrate the internal agony of individuals forced to act against their conscience. Perhaps Mendoza is arguing that people in poverty are sometimes pushed into morally unacceptable situations by larger social structures rooted in inequality and injustice. Crimes born of poverty are thus not always acts of choice, but of desperation. This does not excuse them—it only suggests that solving the problem of poverty requires confronting and changing the systems that sustain it.

In the end, Peping's decision to return to the taxi—even after hearing the news about the murder—suggests that he is now prepared to suppress his moral instincts and move forward with his new, dark reality. It also indicates that he may be coming to terms with the next phase of his livelihood. Peping's destiny is forever changed.

*b. Serbis***.**

The dilapidated movie house serves as the site where the interwoven lives of Nanay Flor, Nayda, Lando, their children, Ronald, Alan, Merly, and those who loiter around offering sexual services to clients unfold. Its architecture—composed of many staircases and complex partitions—suggests an organized chaos held together by the convoluted and messy lives of its inhabitants. It reflects a society plagued by poverty, where sex, immorality, filth, incest, complacency, depression, disappointment, and apathy prevail.

Alan's workstation is surrounded by large boards and painted panels promoting pornographic films featured in the cinema. The dominance of flesh-toned colors and nude figures in these artworks reveals the cinema's core function: to serve as a space for the gratification of sexual desires.

The film's depiction of flooded toilets, cluttered rooms, vandalized walls, and Alan's infected boil—which causes him to limp—symbolizes the physical and moral decay surrounding the entire movie house. Adding to this squalor are the disordered lives of its residents: Nanay Flor's chaotic court battle with her estranged husband over bigamy, and her conflict with her children who side with him; Nayda's disappointment over not being able to practice her profession and her possible incestuous relationship; Alan's unwillingness to accept responsibility for Merly's pregnancy; Lando's subservience to Nayda; and Ronald's unchecked lust. The cinema thus becomes a metaphor for a society teetering on the brink of moral and social collapse.

Inside the main hall, the activities of customers and their patrons suggest how the environment cultivates a culture of desire. The pornographic films playing on screen are not even watched; yet, they contribute to the atmosphere of lust that permeates the space. These individuals are no longer there for entertainment, but for the fulfillment of their carnal needs.

Raising a child in such an environment is a challenge for Nayda and Lando. Their observant child is exposed to the surrounding filth and immorality, increasing the risk that he may internalize distorted values. Society plays a key role in shaping a child's goals, values, and perspectives. In areas where poverty is rampant, children often absorb the morality, ambitions, and behaviors of their immediate community. This perpetuates a cycle, making poverty a deeply entrenched problem that is difficult to resolve.

The community's indifference to the cinema's activities is also telling. Everyone seems to know what goes on inside, but no one takes action. This is how Mendoza portrays societal apathy toward poverty. Society is aware of poverty and its attendant issues, but real solutions remain elusive.

c. Masahista

Iliac's apathy toward his father, stemming from the latter's abandonment, reveals the emotional vulnerability of a family that relies solely on the father for livelihood. When the provider leaves, the entire family suffers—both emotionally and economically. Out of anger, Iliac becomes emotionless, callous, and indifferent, even as he prepares his father's body for burial. His siblings share the same apathy.

This emotional detachment extends into Iliac's work as a masseur and male prostitute. He treats his clients merely as sources of income—objects rather than human beings. He feels nothing.

The lives of Iliac and his fellow male prostitutes in the den depict a grim reality, where men willingly engage in various sexual activities in exchange for money. Male prostitution is not uncommon and has been portrayed in many films. However, this film offers a unique perspective by drawing a parallel between the sexual transactions and the ritual of preparing a deceased loved one for burial and funeral rites.

d. Lola

Lola is perhaps a film that may bore an ordinary viewer. It allows the audience to follow the characters on a seemingly endless and uneventful journey. The film portrays the unfortunate and miserable environment that the characters inhabit in a slow, dialogue-sparse manner—a style that is distinctively Mendoza's.

The main narrative centers on a violent death allegedly committed by Mateo, the grandson of Lola Puring. Had this tragic incident not occurred, the lives of the two elderly women would never have intersected. The film presents violence as an outcome of poverty—a product of lack and desperation. Though never explicitly stated, Mateo's motive for the crime may be rooted in his family's impoverished condition. Likewise, Lola Sepa's eventual decision to accept the amicable settlement offered by Lola Puring is also driven by poverty. She recognizes their dire financial situation, and pursuing the case would only worsen it.

While Lola Puring raises the settlement money, she resorts to minor deceptions, even defrauding some of her clients as a street peddler. The film portrays her as having little to no options—a belief that often prevails in poverty-stricken communities. This same belief may have also led Lola Sepa to settle the case. She likely saw no alternative but to accept the money offered.

Mendoza underscores that poverty is a trap that offers few exits—if any at all. It creates a sense of hopelessness so pervasive that even justice becomes a luxury. Lola Sepa cannot afford to wait for justice to be served for her grandson's death. She lacks the means to regularly attend court hearings, struggling even with transportation costs. In the end, the family has to settle for the money and convince themselves that it compensates for their loss.

The genuine love of Lola Puring and Lola Sepa for their grandsons stands as a powerful counter-narrative to the material poverty that pervades their lives. This love transcends crime, violence, and wrongdoing. It is love that drives Lola Puring to do everything she can to secure Mateo's release. It is love that compels Lola Sepa to give her grandson a proper burial, and it is also love for her family that persuades her to halt legal proceedings in recognition of the hardships they would endure.

Mendoza depicts the unraveling of life in communities gripped by poverty. In such places, emotions, morals, norms, and principles are often sacrificed—if not entirely forgotten—in the struggle to survive. Yet, he also shows that love can flourish even in the most unruly, harsh, and unforgiving environments.

CONCLUSION

The films consistently depict poverty as inextricably linked with crime and violence. Characters such as Peping, who becomes entangled in the drug trade, and Nanay Flor, who is involved in a bigamy case, underscore this connection. The director suggests—though not overtly—that in impoverished areas, crime and violence become almost inevitable. Implicit in this portrayal is the idea that addressing poverty might also alleviate the social ills associated with it.

Mendoza's depiction of poverty highlights a severe lack of resources and employment opportunities. Peping's moral dilemmas and limited choices exemplify this theme. His involvement with Kap's group reflects a broader societal failure to provide viable and ethical alternatives for the marginalized.

The films also point to inequality and social injustice as root causes of poverty. Figures like Kap, Gen, and Sarge represent powerful entities who exert control over the lives and fates of the less fortunate, such as Peping and Madonna. This imbalance reflects a systemic structure that perpetuates poverty and disempowerment.

Recurrent themes of sex and prostitution are portrayed as direct consequences of economic deprivation. The various sexual transactions—from Chico's abuse of Madonna to Ronald's encounter with a gay prostitute—underscore how poverty commodifies intimacy and reinforces cycles of exploitation.

Impoverished communities are consistently represented as overpopulated, chaotic, and deteriorating. In *Serbis*, the rundown and vandalized cinema serves as a metaphor for the broader social decay in poor communities, emphasizing both physical and societal disarray.

Ultimately, Mendoza's films offer a stark reflection of systemic social issues, with poverty at the core. While the narratives suggest that poverty may be a persistent and difficult problem, they also hint at possible solutions—chiefly, the necessity of collective social responsibility. Apathy and indifference, the films argue, are significant obstacles to meaningful change, a theme that resonates across Mendoza's cinematic landscape.

BIODATA

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